



Highland Archaeology Services Ltd
Bringing the Past and Future Together

Airdens, Bonar Bridge



Archaeological Watching Brief

Airdens, Bonar Bridge

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Project Code	HAS-ABB10
Client	Cameron MacKenzie
Planning Ref	SU-09-127
NGR	NH 62117 93774
OASIS	highland4-83237
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Summary

A watching brief was carried out during site clearance for a new house at Airdens, Bonar Bridge on 2nd September 2010. There were no features or finds of archaeological significance uncovered.

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Acknowledgements

Fieldwork was carried out by Lynn Fraser. We wish to thank George Ross for his assistance on site and Mr and Mrs MacKenzie for their kind hospitality. Ordnance Survey mapping is reproduced by permission of Landmark Information Group under Licence 100043217. Historic maps are courtesy of National Library of Scotland.

Site Location

The site is centred at Ordnance Survey National Grid Reference NH 62117 93774 at a height of about 135m above sea level (Figures 1-4). It sits on a terrace at the top of a south facing slope.



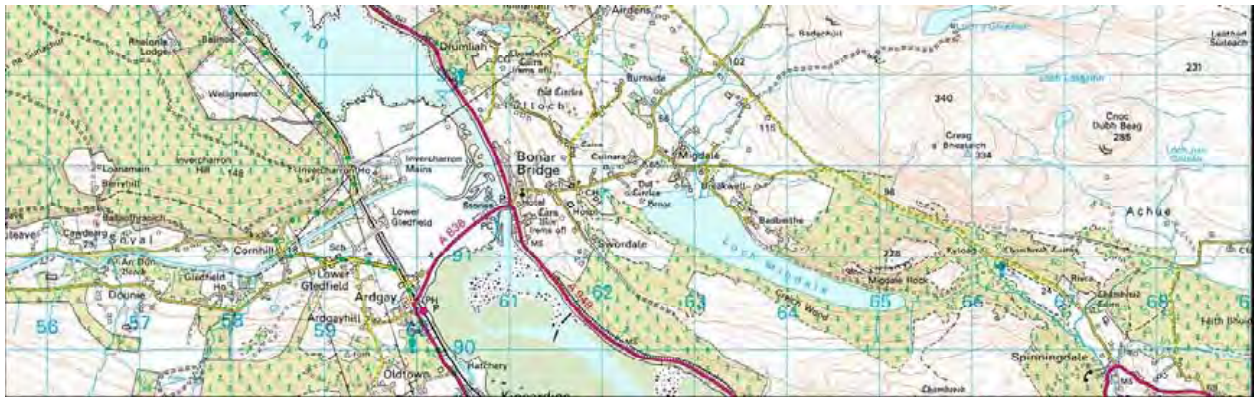


Figure 1 General location

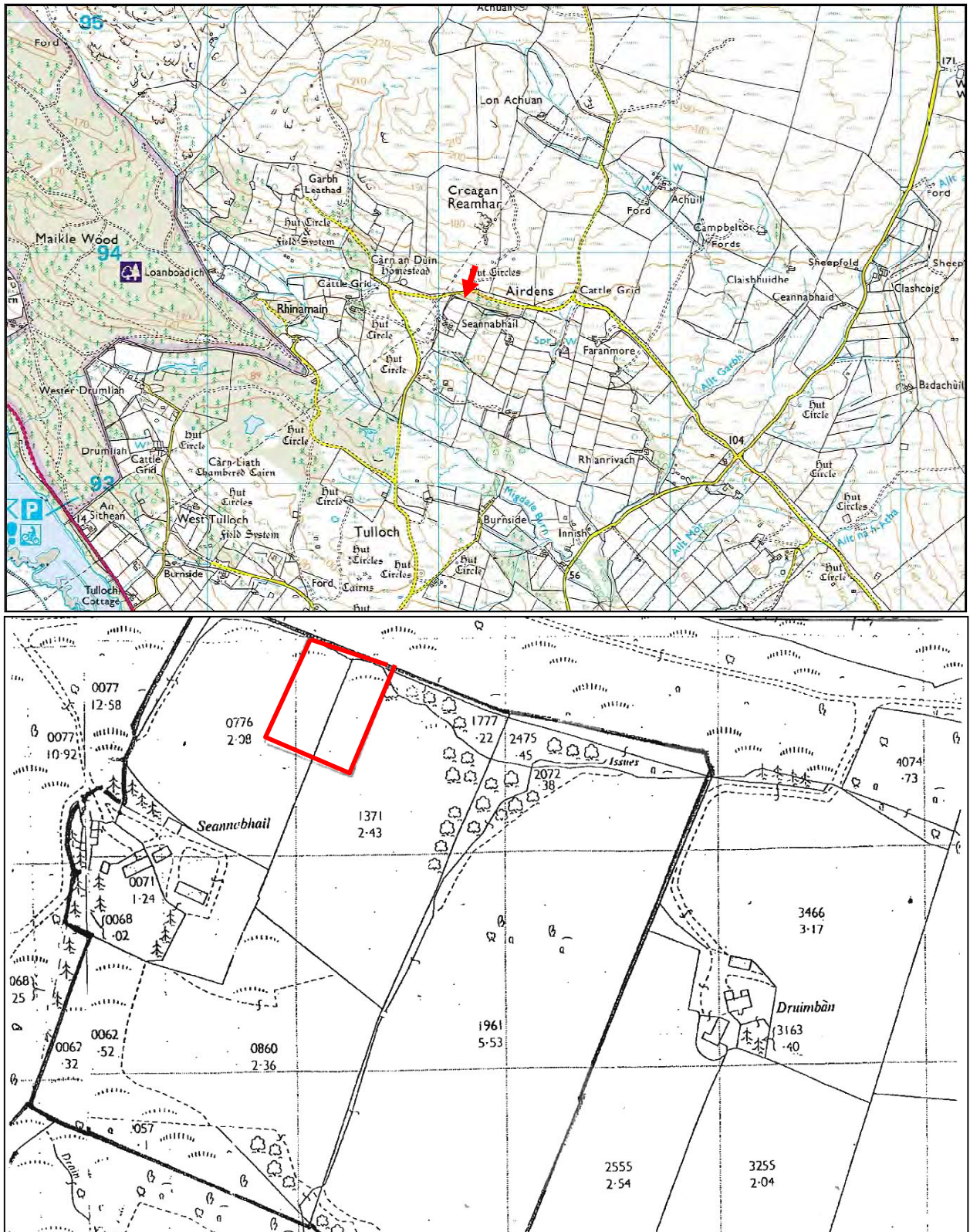


Figure 2 Site location
Site plan below courtesy of C Mackenzie

Introduction

An archaeological watching brief was conducted on 2 September 2010 at the proposed new house site situated to the north east of the existing croft house at Seannebhail, Airdens, Bonar Bridge (Figures 1-2). The watching brief was a requirement of the Highland Council Planning Department prior to development of the site. Its purpose was to efficiently record the character, extent, condition, date and significance of any archaeological remains on the site whilst minimising delays and disruption to the development.

Planning Background

As per Highland Council planning reference SU-09-127, the watching brief was required due to the situation of the proposed house site within an area containing extensive and significant prehistoric remains.

The current planning and policy framework includes the Highland Council's *Structure Plan*¹, and the Scottish Government's *Scottish Planning Policy* (SPP), issued in February 2010, which consolidates and supersedes the previous SPP and NPPG series². The fundamental principles underpinning UK and Scottish policies are set out in *Passed to the Future: Historic Scotland's Policy for the Sustainable Management of the Historic Environment* (2002)³ and the *Burra Charter* (Australia ICOMOS 1999).⁴

Historical and Archaeological Background

The new house site is situated on the slopes to the north-west of Bonar Bridge within the former parish of Creich in the former county of Sutherland, now within the Highland Council area⁵. During prehistory the landscape was inhabited and cultivated and this is evidenced by the plethora of prehistoric hut circles and associated field systems still visible within the surrounding landscape.

The *Old Statistical Account* (OSA) of the Parish of Creich describes the parish as being hilly, mainly covered in heath, with thin, light soils. At this time, the end of the eighteenth century, the eastern half of the parish was more densely populated. Barley, potatoes, oats and peas made up the chief crops grown and there were large numbers of black cattle. However, it is noted that the numbers of sheep were increasing and the resultant sheep farms had diminished both the number of inhabitants and black cattle⁶.

¹ <http://www.highland.gov.uk/yourenvironment/planning/developmentplans/structureplan/thehighlandstructureplan.htm>

² <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/02/03132605/8>

³ www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/pasttofuture.pdf

⁴ <http://www.icomos.org/australia/burra.html>

⁵ Scotland's Places

⁶ Old Statistical Account

By the time of the *New Statistical Account* (NSA) in the mid nineteenth century the population of the area was increasing, perhaps encouraged by the construction of the iron bridge at Bonar Bridge in 1813 and its emergence as a place of export and import as the depth of water was sufficient for shipping⁷.

There is no record of any previous settlement or structures on the site; the croft house and earlier buildings sit at the base of the slope to the south of the site. Roy's *Military Survey of Scotland* shows a sparsely inhabited and cultivated area along the watercourse at the foot of some hills, Ardoechin, which is in the general vicinity of the area now known as Airdens.

The proposed development site is situated amidst extensive prehistoric field systems and hut circles to the north and west. A macehead was found to the east of the site. The development area also lies approximately 4km (as the crow flies) north west of the area where the Migdale hoard was found; a hoard of Early Bronze Age metalwork discovered during rock blasting between 1895 and 1901⁸.

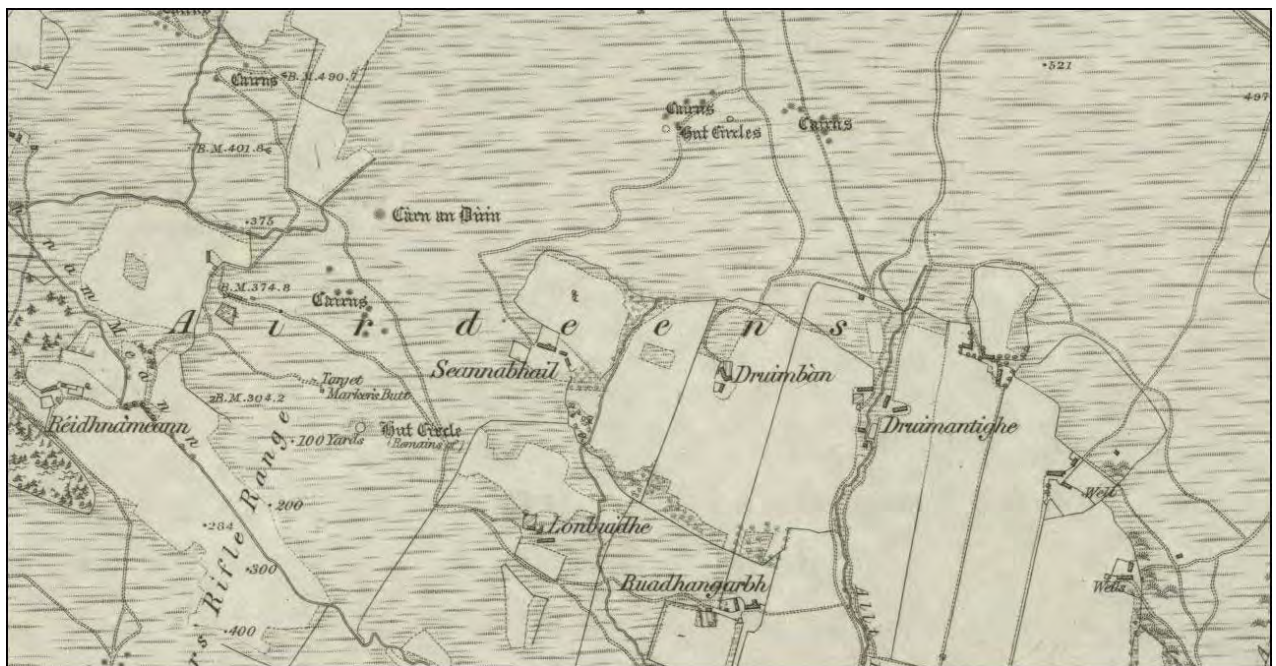


Figure 3 Extract from 1st edition 1:10560 OS Map

Sutherland, Sheet CVIII. Not reproduced to scale. Courtesy of National Library of Scotland

Methodology

Desk-based assessment

Prior to the fieldwork commencing a full check was made of all available historical and archaeological records, aerial photographs and historical maps using the Highland Historic Environment Record

⁷ New Statistical Account

⁸ HHER #MHG10007

(HHER), the National Monuments Record of Scotland, the National Library of Scotland and any other available records or online resources about the site.

Watching brief

The purpose of the archaeological watching brief was to efficiently identify and record any features or finds of archaeological interest prior to development, in order to minimise any delays or disruptions to the project or to propose appropriate mitigation in the event that significant features of interest are uncovered.

Prior to topsoil clearance a photographic record was made of the site using high resolution digital photography.

The site topsoil clearance was conducted under constant archaeological supervision using a mechanical excavator with a 4 foot (1.22m) wide flat-edged bucket. The site and any archaeological features or finds were plotted using DGPS technology and Mobile Mapper software.

The development site was recorded using high resolution digital photography throughout the watching brief in order to record the evaluation as well as any features or finds of interest.

All fieldwork was conducted in accordance with the *Institute for Archaeologists' Code of Conduct*⁹

⁹ IfA 2008

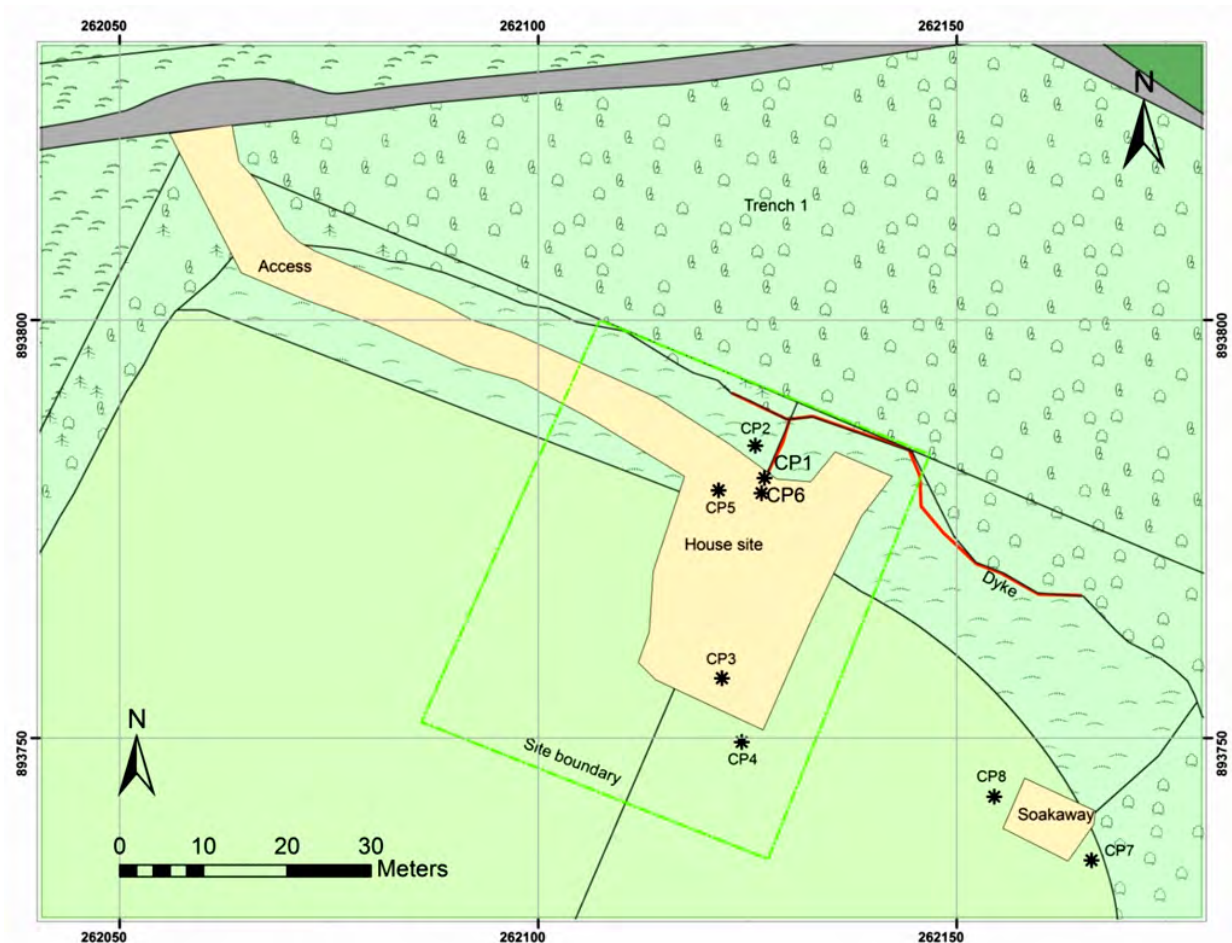


Figure 4 Watching brief areas and camera points

Results

Desk-based assessment

The following historical maps were consulted in the National Library of Scotland online collection.¹⁰

The early maps such as Blaeu's Atlas of Scotland 1654 and Herman Moll's map of 1745 do not depict the study area in sufficient detail to note particular features, although both suggest the site was within open, hilly land and John Thomson's Atlas of Scotland 1832 shows an area called 'Airdines' again in a hilly area. Bartholomew shows 'Airdeens', which is sparsely settled. On Roy's Military Survey of Scotland (1747-1755) the study area appears to be in the vicinity of 'Ardoechin', a sparsely inhabited and cultivated area along the watercourse at the foot of some hills.

The First Edition Ordnance Survey six-inch to the mile map shows Seannabhail farm with the study area to the north as an area of cultivation within heath. There are a cluster of cairns and hut circles to the north east, Carn an Duin to the north west and a hut circle to the south.

¹⁰ NLS Online Historic Map Collection : <http://maps.nls.uk/>

The Second Edition Ordnance Survey one-inch to the mile map again shows an area of crofts within boggy ground or heath land.

The Highland Historic Environment Record (HHER) was consulted online¹¹ and the following sites or events were recorded within the landscape surrounding the new house site. The locations are shown in Figure 5 below:

1. EHG619 Bonar Bridge Water Supply Archaeological Survey (event)

Desk-based assessment and walk-over survey in 2001 in advance of a water supply renewal project at Bonar Bridge, which identified 19 sites of interest, including prehistoric remains.

2. MHG9995 Airdens Hut Circle NH 6206 9384

This is an amorphous hut circle approximately 13m by 11m defined by a mutilated stone wall spread with no evident entrance.

3. MHG41445 Airdens Cairnfield NH 6206 9384

This is a cairn field associated with MHG9995 above.

4. MHG10086 Creagan Reamhar Hut Circles NH 6220 9400

This monument consists of two stone-walled huts approximately 12.5m by 10.5m and 13m in diameter respectively and an associated field system. Only occasional outer facing stones are visible. There is also another area of cultivation that is marked by clearance heaps, lynchets and ruined walls that may be associated with the hut circles.

5. MHG40410 Creagan Reamhar Field System NH 6220 9400

This field system is associated with the hut circles detailed above.

6. MHG10009 Carn an Duin Hut Circle NH 6185 3388

This is a sub-circular hut with a surrounding stone wall and probable cultivation plot with clearance heaps. The hut measures approximately 11.6m in diameter with a double wall 1.6m thick. Both wall faces can be intermittently seen apart from the northern arc. There is a south east entrance.

7. MHG19248 Rhinamain Farmstead NH 6164 9376

This farmstead, comprising one roofed building, two unroofed buildings and an enclosure is depicted on the 1st edition of the OS six-inch map.

¹¹ HHER: <http://her.highland.gov.uk/>

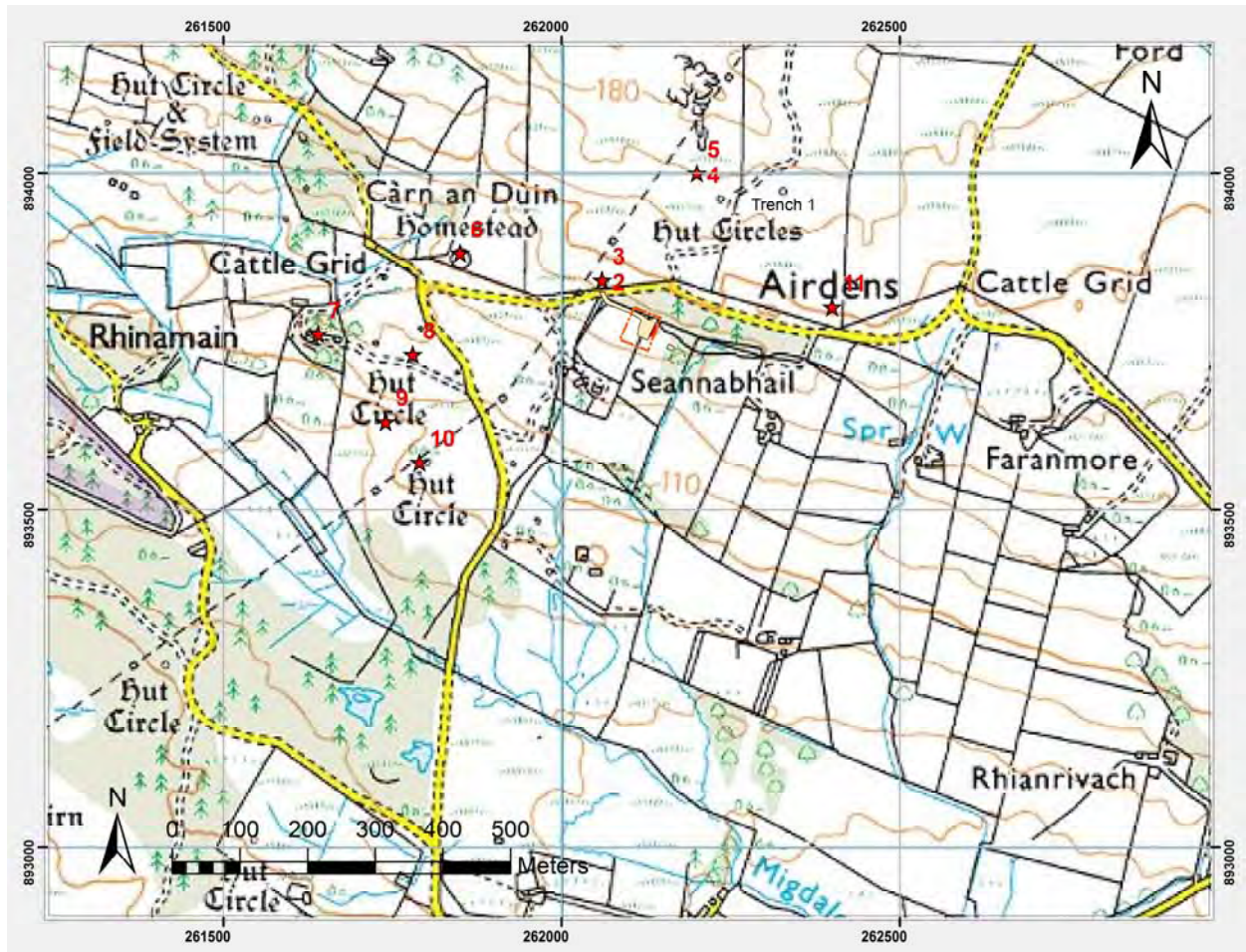


Figure 5 Sites recorded on the Highland Historic Environment Record (HHER)

8. MHG10060 Airdens Hut Circle NH 6178 9373

This monument is described as a mutilated stone-walled hut measuring approximately 13m by 11m. Around the hut is a number of stone clearance heaps, some of which may be contemporary with the monument whilst others may be associated with more recent cultivation.

9. MHG30261 Bonar Bridge Rifle Range NH 6174 9363

There is a large stone structure with a short corrugated iron roof, metalwork from targets and the ruinous wooden shed, which held the targets. Firing points are still visible as are the footings of the ammunition shed.

10. MHG10004 Airdens Hut Circle NH 6179 9357

This is a stone-walled hut situated on a ridge and is 9.5m in diameter. Only the inner wall face is visible with no entrance evident. A number of stone clearance heaps are in the vicinity, which may be from contemporary cultivation plots.

11. MHG10072 Macehead Find spot NH 6240 9380

A highly polished faceted macehead of light-coloured flint was found during ditch clearance at Airdens in the early 1900's. It is a very rare type with comparative examples from as far afield as Morayshire, Staffordshire and Wales.

Modern satellite imagery shows an old stone boundary dyke to the north of the site (Plate 1 below). This appears on the 1st edition OS map, and on the modern mapping. It was also noted during fieldwork. It is undated.

Watching brief

The watching brief was carried out on 2nd September 2010; a dry day starting with some cloud cover and ending with full sunshine.

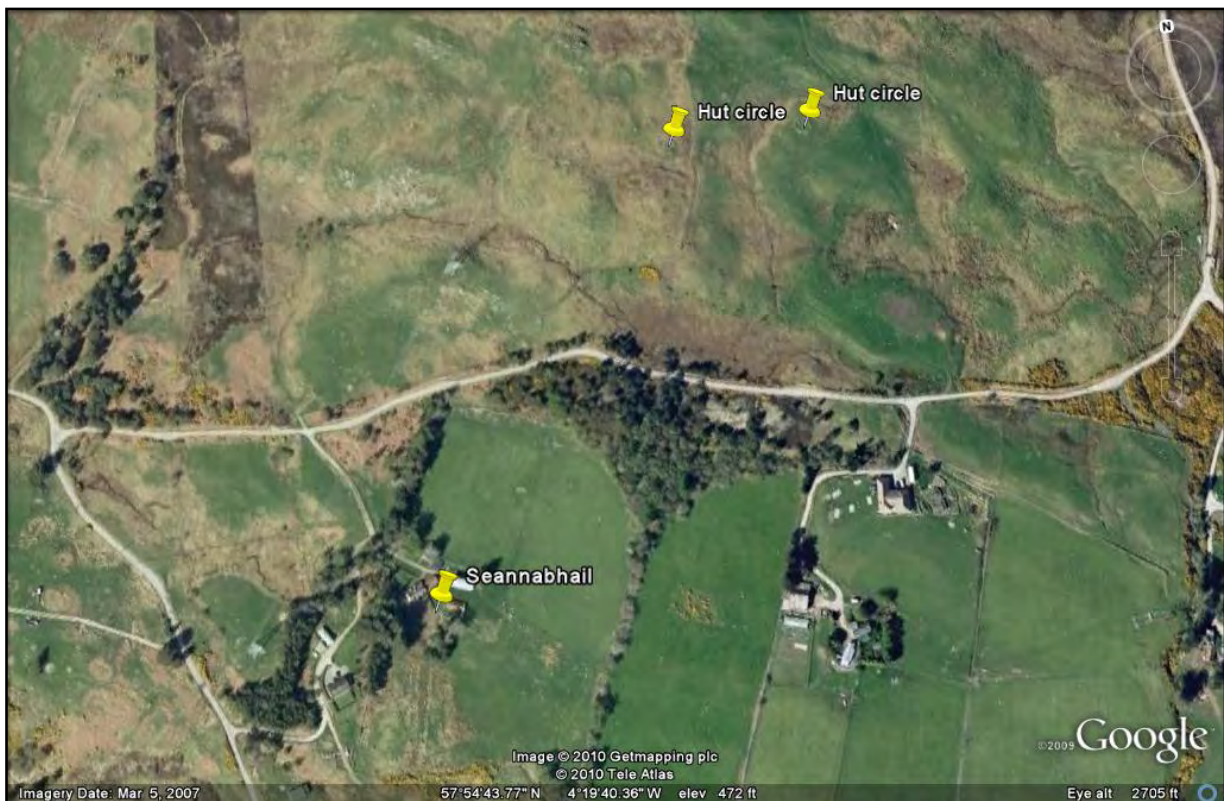


Plate 1 Satellite image of the present day croft, the site area to the north and two hut circles beyond the road. A stone dyke is visible running along the northern perimeter of the site. *Image courtesy of Google Earth.*

Prior to clearance the majority of the site was covered in grass, the field having been used for grazing sheep. Along the northern periphery were substantial bracken, which obscured the remains of an old stone boundary dyke, and some trees. The site was on a gentle slope running downhill from north to south. The topsoil (Context 101) was a dark brown loam; the subsoil (Context 102) was dark orange loamy sand containing sub-angular stones of varying sizes. Occasional large erratic type boulders were dislodged (Plate 2). The trench depth across the site varied from 15-35cm.



Plate 2 General site clearance showing some of the erratic boulders dislodged.



Plate 3 Ground clearance for the new access road into the site. Remains of the stone boundary dyke can be seen to the top right of the picture

An area of clearance material to the north of the site was partially removed. Mrs MacKenzie, in whose family the croft has been for several generations, advised that this area had not been used for any form of habitation in the past.

The stone dyke shown on current maps and in the satellite image was located on the ground, although it was largely obscured by high bracken. Ground clearance for the new access way into the site from the existing road at the NNW corner removed a small section, which had previously been compromised by trees growing in the area (Figure 7).

There were no archaeological features or finds or human remains uncovered during the watching brief.

Discussion

There were no archaeological features or finds uncovered during the watching brief despite the site being in an area rich with prehistoric monuments. It is quite possible that, as the site lies to the south and east of prehistoric areas of habitation, it was used in the past for cultivation only. The present day croft was cultivated, growing crops such as potatoes, until about thirty years ago since when it has been used for grazing. As the topsoil is so thin any possible sign of earlier cultivation will have been destroyed by more recent cultivation practices.

Conclusions and Recommendations

No archaeological features or finds were uncovered during the watching brief and no further work is recommended.

Archive Location

The site archive is held by Highland Archaeology Services, but will be transferred to RCAHMS.

References

Highland Historic Environment Record accessed at <http://her.highland.gov.uk>

New Statistical Account *Criech, County of Sutherland* 1834-45, Vol. 15 accessed at <http://stat-acc-scot.edina.ac.uk/link/1834-45/Sutherland/Criech/>

National Library of Scotland accessed at <http://maps.nls.uk/index.html>

Old Statistical Account *Criech, County of Sutherland* 1791-99, Vol. 8 accessed at <http://stat-acc-scot.edina.ac.uk/link/1791-99/Sutherland/Criech/>

Scotland's Places accessed at <http://www.scotlandsplaces.gov.uk>

Wood, J., 2010. *Airdens, Bonar Bridge Written Scheme of Investigation*.

CARTOGRAPHIC REFERENCES accessed at <http://www.nls.uk/maps/>

Bartholomew, J.G. 1912. *Survey Atlas of Scotland: Plate 50 Lairg*

Blaeu *Atlas of Scotland*, 1654

Moll, Herman, 1745. *County Maps of Scotland: The Shires of Caithness and Sutherland With Strath Naverne which is Part of Sutherland Shire*

Ordnance Survey 1879. *1st Edition Sutherland CVIII* six inch to the mile

Ordnance Survey 1896. *2nd Edition Sheet 102 Lairg* one inch to the mile

Roy, William, 1747-55. *Military Survey of Scotland*

Thomson, John, 1832. *Atlas of Scotland: Sutherlandshire*

APPENDIX 1: Context Register

Number	Type	Description	Over	Under	Finds	Interpretation
101	Deposit	Dark brown loam containing small sub-angular stones	102			Topsoil
102	Deposit	Dark orange loamy and containing sub-angular stones of varying sizes; occasional erratic boulders		101		Subsoil

APPENDIX 2: Index of Photographs

Number	Camera Point	Direction Facing	Date	Taken By	Comments
LF001	-	NW	02/09/2010	LF	Pre-excavation - route of access entering site from passing place on the road
LF002	-	SE	02/09/2010	LF	Pre-excavation - from access looking towards the house location
LF003	-	NE	02/09/2010	LF	Old stone boundary on the north edge of the field
LF004	-	SE	02/09/2010	LF	Pre-excavation - house plot
LF005	-	SSW	02/09/2010	LF	Stony outcrop
LF006	-	N	02/09/2010	LF	Taken from the SE corner of the house plot - clearance stones
LF007	-	NW	02/09/2010	LF	Clearance
LF008	-	S	02/09/2010	LF	Clearing access
LF009	-	S	02/09/2010	LF	Access point
LF010	-	SE	02/09/2010	LF	Ditto
LF011	-	NW	02/09/2010	LF	Post-excavation
LF012	1	NW	02/09/2010	LF	Post-excavation of access track
LF013	2	S	02/09/2010	LF	Stripping
LF014	3	N	02/09/2010	LF	Stripping
LF015	4	NNE	02/09/2010	LF	Stripping
LF016	5	ESE	02/09/2010	LF	Clearance area
LF017	6	ENE	02/09/2010	LF	Stripping
LF018	7	NW	02/09/2010	LF	Stripping soakaway area
LF019	8	SE	02/09/2010	LF	Post-excavation of soakaway area
LF020	9	S	02/09/2010	LF	Post-excavation of main house site
LF021	-		02/09/2010	LF	General view of existing croft house and buildings
LF022	-		02/09/2010	LF	Ditto
LF023	-		02/09/2010	LF	General view from the site